

DIVING IN

Published in Adelaide Fringe (2007) *Word anthology: An anthology from the Adelaide Fringe 2007 Writers Festival*. Adelaide.

It was one of those highrise car parks in the heart of the city, with slatted walls that let you see outside, that let you see how high you were. The fourth story was level with 1960s office blocks – all crushing grey, straight lines and ninety degree angles. But there was also a jagged and distant horizon of taller, narrower buildings, neon signs, satellite dishes and telephone towers all pressed against a hazy sky. There were narrow rectangular office windows, sheets of glass fronting, ornate rooftops with decking and a barbecue area. A drizzly rain subdued the inanimate view. It was surprising how little movement there was – the scene was like a frozen tableau.

‘It’s not very romantic is it?’ Grace said to Alex. A wry smile in return.

‘I mean, most girls get taken up to lofty lookouts or seaside cliff tops. You’ve brought me to the carpark.’

‘It’s your car’ he reminded her, ‘and you parked here this morning’. She raised her eyebrows as if this only continued to prove her point.

They settled into an echoey silence again. Her small car was warm against the cold air outside but the seats were plastic and the roof low. It squeaked in an old familiar way if either of them coughed or moved. She still couldn’t understand why he’d brought her here – why he’d uncharacteristically taken her elbow as they walked down the street for lunch, and guided her here, knowing it was where she parked every day. He’d stood at the passenger side and asked her to open the door. Grace looked at him quizzically but laughed too. Alex was easily one of her most unpredictable work friends – no doubt he was planning some sort of lunch time joy

ride. But when she put the key in the ignition he was surprised 'I just wanted to get away from the office for a little while, but not actually go anywhere.' She took the key out of the ignition.

The irony about the romantic stuff was that there wasn't any. Grace and Alex were just friends. Work friends. Surely if Alex was suddenly to become interested in Grace, he wouldn't pick a carpark to confess his undying love, would he?

So they sat there in silence staring out at the scrappy skyline. Waiting. Grace was waiting. Not telling what Alex was doing. The context was too strange for her to really enjoy. Instead of getting sandwiches and coffee and going back to the clinical staff room to eat them and read the paper and gossip as they often did, they were sitting side by side in her old car, in the carpark, as though something very important was about to happen.

Grace snuck a sideways look at Alex. She narrowed her eyes and reviewed his stoic expression. Chin slightly pointed upward, bottom lip out in childish sort of way, a thoughtful expression in the crease of his brow, his usually placid smile sliding down his face and quickly disappearing. He turned to look at her.

'So, Grace.' She winked and smiled at him. This made him renew his smile and relax as though it was no good resisting her and whatever was troubling him. 'The thing is...'. It seemed he was willing her to finish this sentence for him.

'Yes?' sing song voice, not serious at all.

'I like working with you'.

'Yes, of course Alex, I like working with you too.' Then the obvious line that needed to be said, she felt, sooner rather than later, 'Is there something wrong. What's wrong? I mean why are we here. I'm actually hungry'.

He smiled, slouched and sighed. 'Nothing...wrong. As such'. She smiled encouragingly at him.

'But?'

She noticed his hands for the first time. Really noticed them. They were surprisingly smooth, slightly browned with quite delicate fingers. He was sort of wringing them at the moment.

'Nothing'. Exasperated. He seemed quite put out and she didn't understand what she had done to make him suddenly say 'Let's get something to eat before we're late back'. He quickly opened the door and got out, heading for the lift without waiting for her. She was momentarily hurt for a reason she couldn't fathom. As if she had disappointed him, as if she hadn't played by the rules and was now being punished.

They were silent in the lift. He ran a hand through his reddish hair and then slung it into his coat pocket as if looking for something. Grace frowned and chewed her lip thoughtfully. The silence was historic, epic in its operatic scale lack of volume.

The doors slid open. Alex hurried off saying over his shoulder, 'I've got something to do first, I'll see you back there soon'.

Grace stood on the city footpath while people walked past her, momentarily lost in the discontinuity of her ordinary life. The wind picked up a loose sheet of newspaper and wrapped it around a pole beside her. A child dropped his bag of hot chips, covered in tomato sauce down the front of his stroller. His mother, shouting surprisingly adult comments and pulling out old, yellowed tissues, set to work on cleaning up his face. Something had happened. Grace watched Alex's lean back and long gait fade into the blur of city people and knew that Something had happened.